

BOOK REVIEWS

attend to the well being of mothers and children; natural birth and the role of midwives; disabled mothers and how disabilities affect “successful mothering”; and how to be a “good mother” to children with food allergies.

Section four, “Mothers, Education and Social Change,” includes three essays that consider the experiences of Latina women/mothers; the personal stories of two aboriginal/scholar mothers; the evolving mothers’ movement; and how pollution, energy depletion, government corruption, and overpopulation will affect the future lives of children.

Section five, “Mothers, Partners and Parenting,” includes four essays that show the importance of gender equality in childcare; the value of shared parenting to women’s self-development; the need for mothers to pursue their own life projects; and what black single mothers expect from the fathers of their children.

Section six, “Mothers and Work,” includes five essays that consider why some mothers opt out of the labour market; the experiences of stay-at-home African American mothers; the social construction of the work-life balance myth; the real needs of mothers and early childhood educators; and the need for work place flexibility by mothers and the impact of mothers on labour market policies.

Unsafe Motherhood: Mayan Mortality and Subjectivity in Post-War Guatemala

Nicole S. Berry.

New York: Berghahn Books, 2013.

REVIEWED BY DIANA G. PALMERIN VELASCO

Set in the aftermath of the more than three decades long Guatemalan civil war, Nicole S. Berry’s rich ethnography presents a detailed picture of the unintended effects of the global campaign on maternal mortality on the Mayan village of Santa Cruz. Through participant observation, as well as a variety of research methods that give her access to privileged information, Berry constructs an appealing narrative with a convincing argument: that “the global campaign to decrease maternal mortality has actually created barriers to reducing deaths and also threatens to make some of the very communities that it is designed to help even more vulnerable” (1).

Berry begins with a critique of the western biomedical reductionist approach through which “life and death become the only outcomes by which

pregnancy and birth are understood” (1). She invites readers to consider these outcomes as primary sites for the definition and reproduction of the social world and, hence, the construction of subjectivities. Since the Safe Motherhood Campaign promotes a physiological rather than a social understanding of birth, it unintentionally encourages a significant shift in subjectivity derived from the propagation of “a particular western, autonomous subject” (12) at odds with the social connectivity and mutual responsibility which prevail in Santa Cruz.

In contrast, Berry understands birth in this Mayan village as a social event and a family performance that constitutes a unique opportunity for bringing families together. Vital to her understanding is the common practice in Santa Cruz of home birth assisted by a midwife or *iyom* who is not only someone with a special gift for delivering babies but someone with a special relationship to God. Although she does not criticize the good intentions of global efforts to reduce maternal mortality in Santa Cruz, Berry does insist on the inherent difficulties resulting from the opposition of biomedical knowledge and traditional practice.

To understand the current attempts to reduce maternal mortality in Guatemala, Berry argues that we need to consider the political relevance and symbolic meaning of the issue in the aftermath of the 1996 Peace Accords. The country’s long civil war was especially hard on Guatemala’s indigenous population and, while the Peace Accords formally ended the civil war, violence persists as an everyday experience that affects the poorest and most marginalized sectors of the population. Thus, the government’s commitment to reduce maternal mortality represents an attempt to settle an historical debt and to integrate the indigenous population into a more “modern” Guatemala.

As Berry shows, global efforts like the Safe Motherhood Campaign will not reach their desired goals as long as they are at odds with the local understanding and definition of motherhood. Finally, it is important to note that Berry’s book constitutes a thoughtful and well researched account that will enrich the current conversation about maternal mortality and its causes.